Beyond Marx

Why the Problem Is Power, Not Capital

Thomas J. Bryan

I. The Diagnosis and the Blind Spot

Karl Marx remains, one hundred and forty years after his death, the most penetrating analyst of how capitalism produces systematic exploitation. Das Kapital's account of surplus value—of how the distance between what a worker produces and what a worker receives is not an accident or a moral failing but the structural engine of the entire system—is not seriously disputed by serious people. The mechanism is real. The extraction is real. The class that benefits and the class that is drained of value are real. On this terrain, Marx's achievement is difficult to overstate.

But Marx made a second claim, one that followed from the first with the iron logic he believed governed all historical development: that the state, the church, the legal system, the ideological apparatus, the press, and every other institution through which a society understands and reproduces itself were products of the economic base. The famous formulation from the 1859 Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy: "The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness." The base produces the superstructure. Ownership of the means of production determines the shape of everything else. Change the base—abolish private ownership, socialize the means of production—and the superstructure built to protect and reproduce the old ownership arrangements collapses, because there is no longer anything for it to protect.

This is where the diagnosis becomes a blind spot. Marx was almost certainly correct that the state as he observed it in mid-nineteenth-century England served the interests of the capitalist class. He was correct that law, ideology, and force operated to maintain the conditions under which capital accumulation was possible. But he drew a conclusion from this that the evidence did not support: that the state's coercive apparatus was an instrument of capitalism, rather than an independent dynamic that capitalism had, in this historical moment, captured. He mistook the tenant for the landlord. He saw power wearing its economic clothing and concluded that power was fundamentally economic.

The error was not trivial, and it was not without consequences. If you believe that concentrated power is a product of capitalist property relations, then abolishing capitalist property relations will dissolve concentrated power. The revolution does not create a new ruling class; it eliminates the conditions that make ruling classes possible. The state, having seized the means of production in the name of the whole of society, has by that act abolished itself as the guardian of class interest, and will—over some indeterminate but inevitable horizon—"wither away." The administration of things replaces the government of persons. History ends not in a bang but in a bureaucratic fade.

What actually happened was something else entirely. In the places where Marxist revolution succeeded—Russia, China, Cuba, Cambodia, Yugoslavia, and a dozen others across the twentieth century—the state did not wither. It grew. The party apparatus did not dissolve into the general population. It solidified into a hereditary caste. The means of production, nationalized in the name of the workers, became instruments of extraction deployed against those same workers by a new set of administrators who ate differently, lived differently, traveled differently, and dealt with dissent in ways indistinguishable from the aristocracies and capitalists their predecessors had overthrown. The label changed. The mechanism did not.

This is the argument that follows. Marx was right about economics and wrong about power. He bequeathed to the revolutionary tradition a precise scalpel for anatomizing capitalism and no theory whatsoever of what comes after the surgery—no account of how power behaves when the economic form it inhabits is changed, no institutional

design for preventing the vanguard from becoming the new ruling class, no answer to the oldest question in political theory: who guards the guardians? The gap was not incidental. It was fatal. And it was visible—to critics inside the revolutionary tradition itself—long before the first hammer fell.

II. What Marx Actually Said About What Comes After

It is worth being precise about what Marx left unspecified, because defenders of the tradition frequently invoke complexity, translation difficulty, or deliberate misrepresentation to deflect the charge. The charge is accurate. The vagueness about post-revolutionary political arrangements was not accidental but structural: Marx believed there was nothing much to specify, because the problem of power would dissolve when the economic problem was solved.

The famous schema, laid out most explicitly in the Critique of the Gotha Programme (1875), posits a transitional period between capitalism and the full communist society: the "dictatorship of the proletariat," in which the working class, now in possession of state power, uses it to expropriate the bourgeoisie and reorganize production. This phase requires the state, because the old ruling class will resist. But once the expropriation is complete, once classes as such have been abolished, the state—which exists only to enforce class interests—loses its function. Engels put it as plainly as anyone in Anti-Dühring (1878): "The interference of the state power in social relations becomes superfluous in one sphere after another, and then ceases of itself. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things and the direction of the processes of production. The state is not 'abolished.' It withers away."

This is elegant. It is also, as post-revolutionary history makes grimly clear, not a theory of how power works but a wish about what power will do once the conditions Marx believed created it are removed. It says nothing about the organizational structure of the transitional state—how decisions are made, who makes them, how they are contested, what recourse exists for those who disagree with the party's interpretation of the proletariat's interests. It says nothing about the problem of the party itself becoming a

new possessing class, a problem that Mikhail Bakunin identified as early as 1872 and that Rosa Luxemburg identified in 1904 with considerably more precision.

Bakunin's objection, made directly to Marx in the debates of the First International, was blunt: that a workers' state would simply be a new form of domination, that educated revolutionary intellectuals who seized power in the name of the workers would govern the workers, that the state apparatus was not a neutral instrument that changed character depending on who held it but a mechanism with its own internal logic that would reproduce hierarchy regardless of the intentions of those who operated it. "We are convinced," Bakunin wrote, "that freedom without socialism is privilege and injustice; and that socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality." His prediction of what a Marxist state would look like in practice, made decades before one existed, was not far off.

Marx dismissed Bakunin as confused and impractical, which was partly true—Bakunin's positive program for organizing society after the abolition of the state was considerably less developed than his critique of the state's persistence. But the dismissal was also convenient. Bakunin was asking the right question, and Marx had no answer. The debate was expelled from the First International along with its instigator at the Hague Congress of 1872. The question did not disappear with the man.

III. Lenin's Solution and the Trap It Built

Vladimir Lenin was not vague about organizational matters. Where Marx had sketched the broad contours of revolutionary strategy and left the political architecture of the post-revolutionary period to the withering process, Lenin was a meticulous institutional engineer. His contribution to revolutionary theory was primarily organizational: the vanguard party, developed in What Is to Be Done? (1902), represented a specific answer to a specific problem that the Russian context made acute.

The problem was this: the Russian proletariat, operating under Tsarist autocracy with no legal trade unions, no free press, no parliamentary institutions, and a secret police that dismantled nascent labor organizations before they could consolidate, could not

develop socialist consciousness on its own. Workers in these conditions would develop, at best, what Lenin called “trade-union consciousness”—the capacity to organize around immediate economic grievances, to demand higher wages and shorter hours. This was useful but insufficient. Revolutionary consciousness—an understanding of the systemic nature of capitalism, of the party’s historical role, of the necessity of seizing state power rather than negotiating with it—had to be brought to the working class from outside. The vehicle for this was the vanguard: a tight, disciplined, professional organization of revolutionaries who understood the theory, maintained security against police infiltration, and would lead the workers toward their own liberation.

The organizational principles of the vanguard were “democratic centralism”: internal debate was permitted, but once a decision was reached, it bound every member without exception. This produced a party capable of acting with unified force under conditions of extreme repression. It also produced a party whose internal culture from its earliest days was one of enforced conformity—where minority positions, however well-founded, had to be swallowed once the majority had spoken, and where the definition of what constituted the majority was controlled by whoever controlled the central apparatus.

Rosa Luxemburg saw it immediately. Writing in 1904, before the Bolsheviks had come close to power, she issued what remains the most prescient critique of what Leninist organizational theory would produce if it succeeded. She argued that Lenin’s vision was “full of the sterile spirit of the overseer”—that it was concerned primarily with “control of party activity” rather than its fertilization, with “narrowing” the movement rather than developing it, with “tieing the movement up” rather than drawing it together. Most damning: “Nothing will more surely enslave a young labor movement to an intellectual elite hungry for power than this bureaucratic straightjacket, which will immobilize the movement and turn it into an automaton manipulated by a Central Committee.” She was writing about a party of a few thousand exiles and underground organizers. She might have been writing about the Politburo of 1930.

What Lenin’s theory required in practice was a small group claiming to represent the interests of the proletariat, with no mechanism by which the proletariat could verify or contest that claim, with control of the only legitimate political organization, with

authority to define who counted as a revolutionary and who counted as a class enemy, and—once in power—with the state's coercive apparatus at its disposal. The structure was complete before the first shot of the October Revolution was fired. The subsequent history was not the result of Stalin's personal evil, though Stalin's personal evil was real and significant. It was the result of an institutional design that had no mechanism for accountability and every incentive for consolidation.

Lenin himself, in his final years, became alarmed by what the party had become. His Testament, dictated in December 1922 and January 1923 as he lay dying, expressed concern about Stalin's accumulation of power as General Secretary and urged the party to consider removing him. The Testament was suppressed by Stalin after Lenin's death in 1924. This small episode captures the entire dynamic with precise efficiency: Lenin built a system with no institutional checks on the General Secretary's power; Stalin occupied that position; Lenin tried to warn the party; Stalin made the warning disappear. The trap had caught its builder.

IV. The Labels That Preceded the Violence

One of the clearest demonstrations that the Soviet system reproduced the mechanisms of elite power rather than abolishing them was the kulak campaign—a sequence that followed the same structure the previous papers in this series described: law creates the category, the information apparatus applies the label to specific people, the label does the moral work of removing them from the community of those whose suffering registers, and the violence arrives last and reads as consequence rather than policy.

The word "kulak"—literally "fist" in Russian—had a pre-revolutionary meaning that was already ideologically loaded: a grasping, usurious rural exploiter, someone who profited from the poverty of his neighbors. Lenin had used it since 1918 to describe wealthy peasants who hoarded grain and resisted the Soviet state's requisition campaigns. By the time Stalin announced the "liquidation of the kulaks as a class" in December 1929, the label had been in ideological circulation for over a decade, and the Soviet propaganda apparatus—posters, newspapers, films, party meetings—had spent those years filling the category with specific moral content. Kulaks appeared in official imagery as obese,

grasping figures wearing crosses, hoarding grain while children starved, conspiring with priests and former landlords and White Army remnants against the gains of the revolution. They were, in the language of official communications reviewed by historian Nicolas Werth, “cockroaches,” “blood-suckers,” “vampires,” “vermin and garbage to be cleansed, crushed and liquidated.”

The category was also, critically, elastic. A 1930 OGPU report found that only fifty-five percent of those classified as kulaks in one region actually met even the nominal economic criteria the regime had established. The definition of who was a kulak expanded to include middle peasants, clergy, former Tsarist officials, anyone who had sold grain on the market, anyone who had hired a worker for harvest season as far back as 1925, anyone who had killed a pig in September 1929 before it could be “socialized,” anyone who resisted collectivization, and—in the most circular application of the logic—anyone labeled a kulak by a neighbor who wanted their land. Between 1930 and 1933, between 2.1 and 2.3 million people were deported to Siberia, the Urals, Kazakhstan, and the Soviet North. The deportations provided the OGPU with a labor force that became the foundation of the Gulag system. Those who survived the deportation camps performed forced labor extracting lumber, gold, and coal under conditions that killed them in large numbers.

The sequence is worth examining against the earlier campaigns of the old regimes Marx had analyzed. The English Parliament’s Statute of Labourers in 1351 criminalized the demand for market wages after the Black Death had given workers bargaining power. The post-Civil War Black Codes in the American South criminalized essentially every form of Black freedom except working on a white man’s terms. The Soviet dekulakization campaign criminalized peasant resistance to collectivization—to the expropriation of their land and animals by the state—and labeled that resistance as class treachery. The economic content of the three cases differs. The mechanism—law defines the category, propaganda fills the label, violence follows—is identical. Marx had not replaced this mechanism. He had provided it with a new vocabulary.

The word that replaced “kulak” as the primary dehumanization instrument for more serious enemies was “counter-revolutionary.” Where “kulak” was economically

coded—evoking greed, exploitation, parasitism—"counter-revolutionary" was politically coded, evoking treachery, sabotage, collaboration with foreign enemies of the revolution. The two labels covered different functional needs: "kulak" was used to justify extraction and forced labor from a domestic population that needed to be coerced into the collective farm system; "counter-revolutionary" was used to justify the elimination of political rivals and anyone else whose continued existence was inconvenient. Both were applied with the same elasticity—the definition expanded to fit the operational requirement—and both preceded the violence that arrived in their wake. The pattern is precisely what the apparatus of manufactured consent always produces: a label drawn from the audience's moral vocabulary—in this case, the vocabulary of class struggle and revolutionary fidelity—that makes the application of force legible as justice rather than terror.

V. The New Class

In 1957, a book was published in New York that had been written in a Yugoslav prison by a man who had been a founding member of the Titoist state. Milovan Djilas was a Montenegrin partisan commander, a close associate of Tito during the Second World War, and for several years the Vice President of Yugoslavia. He was also, by the mid-1950s, a dissident whose writing had become an acute embarrassment to the system he had helped build. The book was called The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System, and it made a simple argument with devastating clarity: that the communist revolution, conducted in the name of doing away with classes, had produced a new class more thoroughly in control of the means of production, more insulated from accountability, and more capable of extracting compliance from the population than the bourgeoisie it had replaced.

The new class, in Djilas's account, was the political bureaucracy—the apparatus of party officials, administrators, military officers, and security functionaries who collectively controlled the state's ownership of the means of production and whose specific relationship to those means was one of political control rather than legal title. They did not own factories in the way a nineteenth-century industrialist owned his mill. They

owned them in the more consequential sense: they controlled who ran them, who benefited from them, who was employed in them, and what was done with the surplus they generated. Their property form was political power converted into economic privilege, and the conversion mechanism was the apparatus of the party.

The material privileges of the Soviet nomenklatura—as this governing class came to be known—were not incidental but systemic. By the Brezhnev era, roughly three million people—one and a half percent of the Soviet population—enjoyed access to a world that the remaining ninety-eight and a half percent could not enter. Special stores stocked with Western goods and quality domestic products unavailable to ordinary citizens. Dedicated medical facilities staffed by physicians selected for political reliability. Dachas in prestigious areas outside Moscow whose modern market value would run to tens of millions of dollars. Personal automobiles in a country where cars were a luxury most people never acquired. Schools for children of nomenklatura families that provided pathways to diplomatic, academic, and cultural positions. Separate graveyards. A Moscow physician whose combined household income with his wife amounted to 280 rubles per month, against a subsistence minimum of 75 rubles per person, could recognize what he was looking at: as he wrote in a complaint quoted in the historical record, the nomenklatura "are driving my car, living in my dacha, and eating the food of my family."

Djilas paid for his analysis with nine years in prison. The Yugoslav state's reaction to his argument was itself an illustration of its accuracy: if what he was describing was not true, there was no reason to imprison him. The charge—"slandering and writing opinions hostile to the people and the state of Yugoslavia"—was the charge that every ruling class throughout history has brought against people who describe its operations too precisely. The information apparatus, which in the Soviet and Yugoslav cases the party controlled entirely, did not permit accurate accounts of how the system functioned to circulate freely. The mechanism was identical to what had been described in earlier papers: whoever controls the information environment controls the vocabulary within which people understand what is happening to them.

What Djilas's analysis adds to the theoretical picture is the observation that the new class did not require capitalism to reproduce itself. It required, simply, a monopoly on political power that could be converted into economic privilege. The conversion mechanism was not the market but the party appointment system—the nomenklatura in its technical sense, the list of positions whose occupants were vetted and approved by party committees. Control the appointment system and you control the economy; control the economy and you control the material conditions of everyone in the society; control the material conditions and you control the terms on which anyone can survive, let alone flourish. The structure is familiar. The vocabulary is different. The function is constant.

VI. The Prophecy That Was Ignored

The prediction that Marxist revolution would reproduce elite power under a different label was not, retrospectively, difficult to arrive at. It was made, repeatedly and with considerable precision, by people working within the socialist tradition itself, before the October Revolution, before the Gulags, before the famines. The predictions were ignored, expelled, or suppressed. This is itself a data point: a tradition whose central intellectual mechanism for dealing with unwelcome analysis was denunciation and exclusion was also a tradition that had no internal mechanism for correcting course when the analysis turned out to be correct.

Bakunin said it in 1872 at the Hague Congress: that a workers' state would become a state governing the workers, that revolutionary intellectuals who seized power would not voluntarily relinquish it, that the dictatorship of the proletariat would in practice be a dictatorship over the proletariat. He was expelled from the First International.

Luxemburg said it in 1904: that Lenin's organizational model would "enslave a young labor movement to an intellectual elite hungry for power." She went further in 1918, after the October Revolution, writing that the suppression of democratic institutions in the name of revolutionary necessity was "worse than the disease it is supposed to cure." "Freedom," she wrote from her prison cell in a passage that became famous, "is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently." Luxemburg was murdered

by right-wing paramilitaries in January 1919, but the Bolshevik response to her critique was already apparent: Trotsky described her pamphlet on the Russian Revolution as a "mistake" born of insufficient understanding of Russian conditions.

Leon Trotsky, who had himself warned in 1904 that Lenin's centralism would produce a situation in which "the party is replaced by the organization of the party, the organization by the Central Committee, and finally the Central Committee by the dictator," spent the 1920s fighting Stalinist bureaucratization and the 1930s writing, from exile, an analysis of the Soviet state as a "degenerated workers' state" whose bureaucracy had usurped the revolution. In The Revolution Betrayed (1936) he described in careful detail how the Soviet apparatus had reconstituted the privileges, the hierarchies, and the coercive mechanisms of the tsarist state under new names and with new justifications. He was assassinated with an ice axe in Mexico City in 1940 by a Stalinist agent.

The pattern is worth noting: the people who correctly identified what the Leninist system was building were expelled, imprisoned, suppressed, or killed by the system they had correctly identified. This is not coincidental. The mechanism of manufactured legitimacy requires the suppression of accurate description. A system that depends on its subjects believing they are being liberated cannot tolerate people who accurately describe the liberation as a new form of subjugation. The fact that the critics were themselves revolutionaries, themselves Marxists, themselves participants in the tradition, did not protect them. In some ways it made them more dangerous: an external critic can be dismissed as a bourgeois apologist, but an internal critic who shares the premises and has access to the mechanism's interior is harder to discredit on ideological grounds. The solution was to discredit them on procedural grounds—they had broken party discipline, they had collaborated with foreign agents, they were "counter-revolutionary"—or simply to kill them.

VII. The Problem Is Not the Label on the Box

The obvious objection to the argument being made here is that it proves too much. If power reproduces itself regardless of the economic form it inhabits, then no political

project is possible—any attempt to change the conditions under which people live will simply install a new elite that operates the same mechanisms. This is the objection from cynicism, and it is wrong, but it requires a careful answer.

The argument is not that power is immutable or that elites are a permanent feature of the natural order. The argument is more specific: that concentrated, unaccountable power is self-reproducing regardless of what economic system it nominally serves. The relevant variable is not the economic form—capitalism, socialism, feudalism, theocracy—but the presence or absence of institutional mechanisms that constrain the exercise of power, enforce accountability, and provide genuine recourse for those who are governed. These mechanisms exist in some times and places but not others. Their presence is not guaranteed by any particular economic arrangement. Their absence is compatible with any economic arrangement.

The English Parliament of 1351 operated within a feudal economic system and wrote the Statute of Labourers to maintain feudal extraction. The Soviet Politburo of 1929 operated within a nominally socialist economic system and conducted the dekulakization campaign to maintain socialist extraction. The mechanism—a small group controlling the state apparatus, defining the categories, deploying the labels, directing the violence—was the same. What differed was the vocabulary of legitimation: the English aristocracy justified its power through divine right and natural hierarchy; the Soviet Politburo justified its power through the laws of historical materialism and the leading role of the party. The justification is not the substance. The substance is the mechanism.

What the historical record suggests is that the variable with the greatest predictive power for whether a political system reproduces exploitation or limits it is not the economic system but the degree to which power is genuinely divided, genuinely contested, and genuinely accountable. This is a boring conclusion. It lacks the revolutionary grandeur of Marx's vision of historical transformation. It sounds like the technocratic language of constitutional design, of checks and balances, of institutional reform. But the boredom is itself a symptom of a real problem in radical political

thought: the preference for dramatic accounts of what must be overthrown over careful accounts of what must be built.

Marx's failure was not his economic analysis. His failure was the assumption that getting the economics right would make the politics take care of itself. That once the material conditions of exploitation were removed, the apparatus built to maintain exploitation—the state, the legal system, the information apparatus, the coercive capacity—would dissolve, because it would have no more work to do. History demonstrated that this was wrong in the most straightforward possible way: the apparatus, once built, developed its own interests, its own internal logic, its own momentum toward self-perpetuation. The people who controlled it were not going to liquidate themselves. The system that rewarded loyalty to the apparatus was not going to spontaneously evolve mechanisms for punishing the abuse of the apparatus. Power does not wither away. It has to be constrained by structures specifically designed for that purpose, structures that must be actively maintained against the constant pressure of those who hold power and would prefer not to be constrained by it.

VIII. What This Means

The argument that has been developed across this paper and the others in this series can now be stated with some precision. The fundamental problem of organized social life is not capitalism. It is not any particular economic system. It is the dynamic of concentrated, unaccountable power—the capacity of a small group to control the state apparatus, define the categories through which the population understands social reality, deploy the legal and coercive machinery against those who threaten the group's position, and direct sufficient material benefit toward enough people to maintain the acquiescence necessary for the system to function.

This dynamic is not the invention of capitalism. It predates capitalism by millennia. It has operated under feudalism, theocracy, ancient slave economies, and Soviet socialism. It operated in the river civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt four thousand years ago, where temple and palace complexes extracted agricultural surplus from peasant populations through mechanisms that included elaborate divine sanction, legal

frameworks criminalizing non-compliance, and periodic demonstrations of coercive force. It operated in sixteenth-century England when Parliament criminalized the displacement caused by enclosures that Parliament's members were conducting. It operated in post-Civil War Mississippi when the same state legislature that had provided Confederate soldiers wrote laws criminalizing the exercise of freedom by people who had been enslaved by those soldiers' fathers. It operated in Soviet Russia when the party that had promised the peasants their land organized the forcible collectivization of that land under threat of deportation to Siberia.

What changes across these cases is the vocabulary of legitimation—the specific story the mechanism tells about itself. Divine right, natural hierarchy, historical materialism, the protection of Christian civilization, the defense of the homeland, the war on terror, the necessity of maintaining order: these are different stories. They draw on different intellectual traditions, appeal to different cultural anxieties, require different symbolic performances of legitimacy. But they are doing the same work: they are making the mechanism invisible by translating its operations into a moral vocabulary that the population can accept. The blow comes last, as the previous paper in this series argued. The word comes first. The word is drawn from whatever framework the audience finds compelling. The blow follows as consequence, as justice, as the natural result of the category the label has already established.

Marx identified the economic dimension of this mechanism with great precision and then made the mistake of thinking that what he had identified was the whole mechanism rather than one form it takes. He described the clothing and concluded he had described the body. The body is the dynamic of power itself—the capacity of small groups to control large populations through the combined instruments of force, legal definition, and information management—and it has been wearing different clothing for as long as there have been large populations and small groups aspiring to control them.

The phrase "elite power dynamics" captures something that neither Marxist analysis nor liberal democratic theory adequately handles. Marxism has a theory of economics and a theory of class but an insufficient theory of how power reproduces itself independent of its economic clothing. Liberal democratic theory has a theory of rights and a theory of

institutional design but tends to treat the formal existence of democratic institutions as sufficient to prevent the capture of those institutions by elite interests—which the historical record does not support. Both traditions have more to say about what must be overthrown or protected than about the specific mechanisms through which power exercises itself and the specific mechanisms through which those mechanisms can be constrained.

The answer—if there is an answer, and this paper is cautious about claiming certainty—is not a single economic system or a single constitutional design but the maintenance of genuine contestation over power at every level: the persistence of institutions capable of checking executive authority, the preservation of information environments in which accurate description of how power operates can circulate, and the active defense of these conditions against the constant pressure of those who hold power and have every incentive to eliminate the constraints on it. These conditions are difficult to create and easy to destroy. They require active maintenance by people who understand what is being maintained and why. They are the tedious, unglamorous, perpetually incomplete work of living in a society rather than being administered by one.

Marx was right that the conditions under which people labor shape the possibilities of their lives in ways that can be changed. He was wrong that changing the economic conditions would be sufficient to change those possibilities. The deeper conditions—who controls the apparatus, who defines the categories, who directs the violence, who tells the story of what is happening—operate at a level his theory could not reach. That is where the problem lives. That is where the work remains.

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Research and essay composition by Claude/Anthropic

Sources and Further Reading

The primary texts on Marx's theory of the state and the withering-away thesis include his Critique of the Gotha Programme (1875), Friedrich Engels's Anti-Dühring (1878) and The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State (1884), and Lenin's The State and Revolution (1917), the latter of which both transmits and begins the distortion of the Marxist theory of the state that it claims to clarify. These are all available in their original forms and require no secondary mediation.

Lenin's organizational theory is most completely stated in What Is to Be Done? (1902). The most important contemporary critique is Rosa Luxemburg's Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy (1904), which was later republished in English as Leninism or Marxism? Her critique of the Bolshevik Revolution itself—unfinished at her death—appears in The Russian Revolution (1918, posthumously published). Luxemburg's collected political writings are available in Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, edited by Mary-Alice Waters (Pathfinder Press, 1970).

Milovan Djilas, The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957) remains the essential account of how Soviet communism reconstituted elite power under new names, written by someone who was inside the apparatus when it was doing so. Its companion, The Unperfect Society (1969), develops the analysis further.

On the dekulakization campaign: Nicolas Werth's essay "Dekulakisation as Mass Violence" in the Sciences Po Mass Violence and Resistance database provides the most precise account. R.W. Davies and Stephen Wheatcroft, The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931–1933 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) establishes the demographic consequences. Lynne Viola, The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements (Oxford University Press, 2007) reconstructs the experience of deportees.

On the nomenklatura system: Mikhail Voslensky, Nomenklatura: Anatomy of the Soviet Ruling Class (Bodley Head, 1984) is the primary source, written by a former insider.

Seweryn Bialer, Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability, and Change in the Soviet Union (Cambridge University Press, 1980) provides the more academic account. On the privileges specifically, the primary materials assembled by the Lviv Center for Urban History offer extraordinary detail.

On Bakunin and the Marx-Bakunin debate: Wolfgang Eckhardt, The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs. Marx in the International Working Men's Association (PM Press, 2016) is the most thorough recent scholarly treatment. Bakunin's own writings on the subject—particularly his 1872 essay On the International Workingmen's Association and Karl Marx—are available in Sam Dolgoff, ed., Bakunin on Anarchy (Knopf, 1971).

On Trotsky's critique of Soviet bureaucratization: The Revolution Betrayed (1936) is the essential text. Isaac Deutscher's three-volume biography—The Prophet Armed, The Prophet Unarmed, The Prophet Outcast (Oxford University Press, 1954–63)—remains the definitive account of Trotsky's political life and thought.

The broader theoretical tradition on power as an independent variable, not reducible to economic relations, includes Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish (1975) and the first volume of The History of Sexuality (1976); Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks (1929–35), particularly the analysis of hegemony; and Charles Tilly's Coercion, Capital, and European States (Blackwell, 1990), which offers the most empirically grounded account of how state power and capital accumulation co-evolved in European history without either fully determining the other.

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